

Let me put the question this way: “If, morally speaking, everything else is equal between two sexual relationships, does gender matter?” The history of the discussion, up till recently, has been, “yes, it matters very much.”

The controversial question about sex in Jesus’ day was not homosexuality, but divorce. When he was asked about it, Jesus quoted, interestingly, from what we now recognize as both creation accounts of Genesis. His answer points to a theological method. He reframed a moral question in basic theological terms; namely, God’s intention in creation. I also follow him to the creation accounts, which, in turn, draw our attention to three features about sexuality: gender, intimacy and children.

“From the beginning of creation,” Jesus answered “God made them male and female.” Gender is more than sex, it is part of our being. Individually we are either male or female, but as a species we are male *and* female. Only together do we reflect God’s image. This arrangement, Genesis says, is part of God’s good purpose. But it is not always experienced as a good thing. Thanks to the feminist voice, we have become aware of how sin has distorted that difference. In patriarchy, gender difference is turned into a pervading hierarchy in which men assume power over women in rigidly defined roles. We are only beginning to recover the message of the creation account. Gender is both a gift and a task. Together, men and women form the rich fabric of human society, together they fulfill the creation mandate, and together, they glorify God. Their contributions are equal, different and complementary.

An alternative to this Judeo-Christian view of sexuality is the quest for androgyny. As early as the time of Plato there was a myth of the complete human, with both sex organs. This being was unfortunately split in half. So we have the human male and female. The ideal is not so much to seek unity by relating with the other half but to integrate both into the self. We can find echoes of this quest in the psychology of Carl Jung. Popular culture expresses it variously as unisex fashion, or fantasy movies like “Mr. Mom”. As a social philosophy, androgyny would minimize differences between men and women as merely biological. The word “person”, in modern times has come to express a human essence, which is beyond gender. What makes a person is interiority, feeling, and will. The body, sexuality included, is an instrument of the person. At times it is experienced as a limitation, which has to be overcome.

In his book “Embodiment,” theologian James Nelson argues that sexual expression is fundamental to our identity as embodied beings. To curb sexual repression is a denial of bodily pleasures, hence of the goodness of the body. Sexual expression is a kind of language of the body, through which one person communicates with another. Interestingly, when it comes to gender, Nelson seems to downplay bodily determination in men and women. He supports androgyny because it corrects what he calls sexist dualism. The governing principles about sexual choices are human standards. In this we find the echo “the bible has no sex ethic, only a love ethic.” In sexual expression, what matters is not gender, but the level of loving commitment.

Karl Barth, on the other hand, regards gender as a key to living fully human lives. The dialectic between men and women’s unity and difference is foundational. It is the key to all human

relationships. For Barth, to be human is to embrace this divine arrangement. In our limitation we are compelled to seek the other. Men and women are meant for mutual exploration and co-operation, to question each other and the world. Sexual union between a man and a woman is the quintessential expression, in the body, of this divinely ordained bipolarity. When a man and a woman make love, they act out the universal need each every man has of woman, and woman man, in every sphere of life. When society tries to bypass this limitation, in the quest for androgyny, for example, it substitutes an artificial creation for God's own. This is the theological framework behind his disapproval of homosexual relationships, as well as social institutions exclusively for men or women.

"Does it matter who you have sex with, as far as gender is concerned?" I hope to convince you, at least, that it is not just a peripheral issue, a question only for the bedroom. The answer we come up with reflects our self understanding as created, embodied beings. It also implies alternative social visions. Do we want a society in which the differences between men and women are celebrated and valued, or one in which they are minimized or dismissed? I rather like the proposal by the ethicist, Lisa Stowe Carhill, who wrote,

Human flourishing, as sexually embodied, depends on the realization of the *equality* of the sexes, male and female; and in their sexual union, on the further values of *reproduction, pleasure and intimacy*. The *institutions gender, marriage and family* should ethically and normatively be responsive to and should enhance these values.

The history of sexuality in Christian thinking is not uniform. Certainly it is not uniformly defensible. Fairly early in our history, celibacy was regarded as a better vocation than marriage. Mind you, the early church also defended marriage against heresies that really denied the body. I am in essential agreement with Eric's account of the attitude of the Church Fathers. I want to underline the assessment that they took us on a long detour away from the biblical account of sexuality as expressed in the story of Adam and Eve, which spoke so poetically about cleaving together in one flesh, about being naked, and not ashamed. What was remarkable, however, was that, despite the ideal of celibacy, teaching about marriage developed quite consistently. Within the honourable estate of marriage sex has two main purposes which belong together. Sex is for procreation, and it unites husband and wife. Making babies and making love belong together. "And what God has joined together", said ethicist Paul Ramsay, "let no one put asunder!" For a long time procreation almost overpowered intimacy. What we are faced with, in my view, is an over correction in the other direction.

The restoration of intimacy to an equal footing with procreation has been underway for a long time, certainly since the Reformation. But we have crossed a watershed in the invention of birth control. We live in the era of AVR, "after the vulcanization of rubber." For the first time it is possible to have sex without having children. Before birth control, it was obvious that procreation is integral to the meaning of sex, since the two go together. When it is possible to separate the two, we can now realistically pursue sexual intimacy apart from procreation. Some have argued that we should do just that: making love and making babies are two different things. You see how this relates to the decisions we have to make in November. If children are an integral part of the meaning of sex, then obviously gender matters, since only sexual union between a man and a woman can produce a

child, barring artificial means.

Before we move on from sexual intimacy, I want to pause for a moment to consider the relationship between intimacy and friendship. In the Greco Roman world, a wife is not considered a worthy friend of her husband. Friendships happened outside of marriage, and its bonds were often stronger. The high sexual ideal of the early church, with its accompanying discipline such as the prohibition of divorce, actually served to elevate the status of women and allowed true friendships to emerge between husband and wife. Christian Europe developed friendship into a form of intimacy that can be enjoyed between people regardless of gender. “Spiritual friendship” was the norm in monastic communities. Its influence extended to society and fostered friendships between men and women. Occasionally these friendships were acted out sexually, as in the famous case between Abelard and Heliose. So there is an intimacy in our tradition in which gender does not matter, it is friendship. But sexual intimacy is singled out from the many possibilities of human intimacy and protected by clear and strong boundaries in the institution of marriage. With the sexual revolution the boundary between friendship and sexual intimacy has been blurred. Society seems to promote the idea that sexual intercourse is the logical conclusion in a continuum of increasing intimacy. Short of that, people are “just friends.” I believe that we moderns have a lot to learn from our tradition about the deep intimacy of friendship in which sex is neither necessary nor appropriate.

Now for the other purpose, procreation. To say that having children is an integral part of sex is not to say that every time we make love, we do it for the purpose of making a child. When you are a gleam in your father’s eyes, he was not thinking about you! Rather, to say that sex is also about procreation is to accept children as a good outcome of the marital relationship considered as a whole: a progression of love, which moves from the self to the other, and moving beyond that, into a new life. It is obvious that the biological processes which lead to sexual intercourse have the purpose of producing offspring. I am not arguing against birth control or family planning, because the advantage of human reproduction does not lie in numbers but in stability. Humans are among a group of animals, including wolves and geese, which form life long pair bonds. They have few offspring but provide their young with a long period of nurture. Human parents also transmit verbal and cultural skills to their children. Sexual attraction, fidelity, even jealousy, are natural ways to cement the pair bond, and thus safeguard the advantage of a long and stable period of maturing. When intimacy is considered as an end in itself, isolated from the natural consequence of procreation – and I am not talking about individual acts but the relationship, taken as a whole - then children will be regarded as an optional extra, a side effect, and planned parenthood will become planned unparenthood. When this becomes the norm, the meaning of sexual relationship will be fundamentally altered and its meaning will not be recognised by future generations. The understanding of sex in any culture is preserved and passed on in its public institutions. So far, that institution is marriage, which is defined, in common law, as the union between a man and a woman. When we take gender out of that equation, as the church’s blessing of same sex union will signal, we are taking a decisive step to sever the connection between procreation and intimacy. Same sex relationships did not start the division; it is a consequence of it. But formalising them will be a further widening of that division. The institution of marriage is not unique to Christians but is shared across cultures and through time. The unease over removing gender in the definition of marriage is felt not only among Christians, but also by older cultures that have not wholeheartedly embraced the modern worldview. Sex to them, even with birth control, is still inseparably

connected with children and family. The Church's blessing of same sex union is seen as the removal of yet another plank from the family, a process which they have watched with incomprehension and alarm. In this Diocese, these older cultures are also our neighbours.

Does gender matter? Yes, it does. It is part of God's good gift to our individual identity and our society. It is, however, not relevant to the intimacy between friends, except as we related out of our gendered selves. Yes, it matters fundamentally in sexual relationships. So where do we go from here? For what it is worth, I recognize two powerful strands in the mind of the church. One of them is a greater understanding of the situations of gays and lesbians, which has moved the church to a place of tolerance. The other is an abiding commitment to the received understanding of marriage, with a corresponding fear that this beleaguered institution cannot withstand much further weakening. In my more optimistic moments, I believe that we can work out a way which honours both these two powerful strands. It will require compromise. But a good compromise does not hide in ambiguities. A good compromise is the principled expression of an ideal in a world of real people. At the very least we should be clear about what is on the table. Is the proposed blessing an extension of marriage? Is it the creation of a parallel institution? Or is it a pastoral act of solidarity which honours the received tradition? These are incompatible proposals leading to very different places. I believe that principled pastoral action is possible. I am doubtful, however, that it can be accomplished in a hurry, or through the kind of three minute sound bite debates on the floor of synod on a motion, which to date is short on details, the final form of which is still unknown.

Works cited in this paper:

Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, III. 4 §§54; Lisa Sowle Cahill, Sex, Gender & Christian Ethics 1996; James Nelson, Embodiment 1978; Paul Ramsey, One Flesh (Grove pamphlet 1965)